# "JONAH: I - RUNNING AWAY FROM GOD"

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Jonah 1

You know who I think should get a Nobel prize? The person who invented caller ID! What do you think? Don't you love it? I mean, how many times, before caller ID was around, were you interrupted at dinner time by calls from telemarketers? And how many times, in an election season, did you get pre-recorded calls about how a candidate was so wonderful, and why you should vote for him or her? And now, you know, you don't even have to pick up your phone and look at the caller ID. If you have your television on, at least on mine, the caller ID shows up on the television screen! Love it!

Well, caller ID is the best thing since sliced bread to avoid calls you don't want to take.

And speaking of avoiding calls - well, that is the subject of today's sermon. Calls - not like telephone calls - but calls, like the ones that come from God. And the main character in the sermon is perhaps the biggest call avoider of them all - a man by the name of Jonah.

I'm sure most of you have heard of Jonah before, but I'm willing to bet, that the only thing you know about him, is that somewhere along the way, he ended up in the belly of a whale. Am I right?

Well, for the next four weeks we're going to get to know Jonah really well. His is an interesting and at times, intriguing story, and I think we'll discover, that, at times, we might have a lot in common with him.

Jonah, was the son of a man named Ammitai and he lived north of Nazareth. He was a prophet. We don't learn much about him biographically from the Biblical book that bears his name. All we know is that in just the second verse of that book, God calls Jonah to a very special task. He wants him to go right then to Nineveh to prophesy to the people.

Now, let me tell you about Nineveh - not a nice place, and that's putting it mildly. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, the most powerful empire in the world at that time. They had a reputation for cruelty and brutality. When they want to battle, they not only plundered the land, but treated the people in horrible ways. They worshiped false idols, and, very important to note, they hated

the Jews - and the Jews hated them right back. (Remember, Jonah was a Jew.)

God wanted Nineveh to straighten up and fly right, to give up their evil ways, and turn to Him. He wanted them to know that if they didn't, it would be at their own peril - and He would have the final word. And He was sending Jonah to deliver this news.

Or at least, He was trying to send Jonah to deliver the news. As you heard in the reading, Jonah wanted no part of it. He would have rather gone any where else for God, but not to Nineveh. No way!

So, what does he do? He takes off in the opposite direction. Nineveh was located in present day Iraq. Jonah jumps on a ship at Joppa, and sails off towards Tarshish, which is present day Spain - nearly 2000 miles away from Nineveh. When Jonah tried to run from God, he really ran!

You can almost hear him breathe a sigh of relief, when he gets on that ship, and it leaves the dock. Phew! Dodged that bullet! No way he was going to Nineveh. So relieved was he to be on his way, that the scripture says he went down in the hold of the boat and fell asleep. I guess he thought things were going his way.

He couldn't have been more wrong. His trouble was just beginning. A mighty storm came up, so mighty that the ship threatened to come apart, and the sailors were beside themselves. They figure out that God is angry for some reason and has sent this storm, and they then figure out that it is because of Jonah. So they wake him up, confront him, and finally, in a desperate attempt to save themselves and their ship, they throw Jonah overboard, and immediately, the sea calms down and the storm ends. Well, that was enough to convince those pagan sailors that God was real, and the scripture says, they made vows to Him.

And what about Jonah? Well, God could have let him drown - after all, Jonah had turned his back on God. But instead, God sent an unlikely rescuer - a whale, and there Jonah stayed for three days and three nights. End of chapter one.

What are we to make of this - Jonah's story? Well today, we're going to concentrate on God's call on his life, and then, God's call on our lives. We're going to look at why he did what he did, and how we are to respond when God calls us - which He will, if He hasn't already.

So, why did Jonah say no when God called him to go to Nineveh? Well, for a number of reasons. First of all, as a good Jew, he hated the Ninevites - absolutely, positively hated them. So why should he try to save them?

Secondly, I'm sure he was afraid. It would be dangerous, and why should he risk his neck for people that he hated? The Ninevites were brutal and fierce, and there was a very real chance they would brutalize him, or even kill him - when he brought the word from God.

Thirdly, and, most like us, maybe it was that Jonah wanted to call his own shots, do what he wanted with his life. Going on a dangerous mission to deliver bad news was not his idea of a fun time, and so off he went to do his own thing, and for a little while at least, it looked like his plan was working. He got to Joppa, found a spot on a ship sailing way far away from Nineveh, and found a nice spot to lay his head and take a nap. Life was good - or so it seemed -

Until it began to spiral out of control - down and down and down. Which is what happens when we turn away from God. Life spins out of control. Storms come up. Chaos reigns. We lose direction, and lose focus.

For a number of years, I served as the chairperson of the Board of Ordained Ministry for our conference, and I can't tell you the number of times a candidate for ministry would say that for years and years, they turned away from God's call on their life, because they were afraid, or they were comfortable where they were, or they wanted to be in control. But God's call never left them, God kept wooing them and calling them, and things were never right in their life until they said "Yes" to God.

Things were not right for Jonah when he said no to God's call.

What about you? Let me remind you that when I talk about God's call on your life, I'm talking to everyone. I'm not just talking about calls like being called to ordained ministry, or called to be a missionary, or a prophet. One pastor put it this way: "The call of God is not just to the clergy - but comes to anyone at any time. In fact (he writes), Jesus went directly to the common, ordinary folk of his time to find recruits for the work of the kingdom . . . God intends to reach human kind through human ministry." (On-line, lectionarysermons.com, "The Phone's Ringing")

God calls each of us throughout our lives to do things. Some are big, some are small, some we can do easily, some are a challenge. Sometimes our calling is a career - some are called to teach, others to care for others in the medical field, others in an office, others in a factory. You get the idea - some of you know that it was God who put into your mind and heart the path your future would take in terms of your working life.

Sometimes our calling is about relationships or ways to use the gifts He has

given us. Sometimes we're called to reach out to others - in small ways like phone calls or visits, or in big ways like mission projects.

And sometimes, God's call comes in the form of a nudge by the Holy Spirit where you just know inside because you feel it that you need to be doing something. Someone's name comes into your mind, and you know you need to call that person or care for that person. Or a situation comes into your mind, where you feel compelled to do something. Or an opportunity is lifted, and you feel God calling you to take part.

God calls all of us at various times in our lives, and the question Jonah's story compels us to ask ourselves is: how do we answer? How will we answer? Will we be like Jonah and run the other way, or will we be like the disciples in this morning's Gospel lesson, and drop everything and do what Jesus asks?

My prayer is that we will be like the disciples - stepping out in faith, trusting God's voice and direction, trusting that He will give us what we need to answer the call. For when we do, my friends, life is exciting. I think about how many times in the past few years we, as a church, have answered God's call to action, and what wonderful things have come of it! Sure, at times it's been scary, and sure, at times, things sometimes seemed tougher than we could handle, but we went where we heard God calling us, and it's been wonderful!

I remembered this week reading about an old Charlie Brown comic strip that showed Charlie Brown, Lucy and Linus laying on the grass looking up at the clouds in the sky. Lucy says, "If you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in the cloud formations. What do you see, Linus?"

Linus says, "Well, those clouds up there look to me like the map of the British Honduras in the Caribbean. That cloud up there looks a little like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor. And that group of clouds over there gives me the impression of the stoning of Stephen. I can see the Apostle Paul standing there to one side."

Lucy says, "Uh huh. That's very good. What do you see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?" And do you know what he said? "Well, I was going to say I saw a ducky and a horsie, but I changed my mind!" (James W. Moore, *There's a Hole in Your Soul That Only God Can Fill,* p. 135)

The author who recounted that comic strip then said, "We can all relate to Charlie Brown, can't we? There are so many things out there to see and we don't always see them. But when we find our great dream, our unique mission, our special cause, our real purpose, then everything speaks to us of God. We become

'sermonic bloodhounds' sniffing out God's truth everywhere. Every bush becomes a 'burning bush.' Every place becomes a sacred place. Everywhere we look, everything we see reminds us of God and all that He has lovingly prepared for us." (Ibid, p. 136)

He is absolutely right. When we listen to God's call on our lives, and answer yes, instead of running in the opposite direction like Jonah, everything changes. Everything we see reminds us of God and His love. And in everything we do, we are reminded that no matter where we go, God is already there.

So I want to close with one final word of encouragement. Everyday when you wake up, pray to God that He will make His will known in a mighty way to you that day - that He will tell you what He wants you to do and where He wants you to be. That's a risky proposition, I know, because we're all planners and we like to lay things out just the way we want them to be, but who knows what we're missing by not asking God to call the shots, as it were?

It is risky, and it might even be scary - leaving it all up to God. And if it is scary for you, let me leave you with this old, old story that the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard used to tell. One day a man was trapped on the edge of a cliff with a raging fire burning toward him. It would only be a minute or two before the fire consumed him, when he heard a voice from down below the cliff in the darkness calling out to him, saying "Jump!"

"No!" the man screamed back. "I can't see you! There's only darkness down there!"

The voice from the dark shouted back, "Jump anyway. I can see you!"
(Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story,* p. 81)

Not a bad way for us to think about answering God's call on our lives every single day. We can "jump anyway," do anything He calls us to do, because He can see us, and He is with us, and He will not let us go. So may you and I listen for His voice and answer His call. May it be so.

Amen.